



CDC FAX INFORMATION SERVICE

- Tuberculosis: General Information

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease that is spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body, such as the brain, the kidneys, or the spine. TB germs are put into the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs or sneezes. When a person inhales air that contains TB germs, he or she may become infected. People with TB infection do not feel sick and do not have any symptoms. However, they may develop TB disease at some time in the future.

The general symptoms of TB disease include feeling sick or weak, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. The symptoms of TB of the lungs include coughing, chest pain, and coughing up blood. Other symptoms depend on the part of the body that is affected.

The Difference Between TB Infection and TB Disease

People with TB infection but not TB disease have the germ that causes TB in their bodies. They are not sick because the germs are inactive in their bodies. They cannot spread the germs to others. However, these people may develop TB disease in the future. They are often prescribed treatment to prevent them from developing the disease.

People with TB disease are sick from germs that are active in their body. They usually have symptoms of TB, such as feeling sick, coughing, weight loss, fever, or night sweats. Usually, people with TB disease of the lungs or throat are capable of spreading the disease to others. They are prescribed drugs that can cure TB.

How is TB Spread?

TB is spread from person to person through the air. When people with TB disease of the lungs or throat cough or sneeze, they can put TB germs into the air. Then other people who breathe in the air containing these germs can become infected.

People with TB disease are most likely to spread it to people they spend time with every day, such as family members or coworkers. If you think you have been around someone who has TB disease, you should go to your doctor or the local health department for tests. It is important to remember that people who have TB infection but not TB disease cannot spread the germ to others.

What Is a Tuberculin Skin Test?

The tuberculin skin test is used for finding out whether a person is infected with the TB germ. It does not tell whether a person has TB disease. For the skin test, a small amount of fluid called tuberculin is injected under the skin in the lower part of the arm. Two or three days later, a health care worker looks for a reaction on the arm.

What Does a Positive Reaction Mean?

A positive reaction to the tuberculin skin test usually means that the person has been infected with the TB germ. It does not necessarily mean that the person has TB disease. Other tests, such as a chest x-ray and a sample of phlegm, are needed to see whether the person has TB disease. People who have a positive reaction to the skin test but who do not have TB disease cannot spread the germs to others.

They may be given a drug to prevent them from developing TB disease. People who have TB disease must take several drugs to cure the disease.

Skin Testing for Persons Who Have Been Vaccinated with BCG

BCG, or bacille Calmette-Guérin, is a vaccine for TB disease. BCG is used in many countries, but it is not used widely in the United States.

BCG vaccination does not completely prevent people from getting TB. People who have been vaccinated with BCG can be given a tuberculin skin test. Although BCG can cause a positive reaction to the skin test, it is more likely that a positive reaction is caused by TB infection if

- (1) the reaction is large,
- (2) the person was vaccinated a long time ago,
- (3) the person has been around someone with TB disease,
- (4) other family members have had TB disease, or
- (5) the person is from a country where TB is very common.

Preventive therapy

If you have TB infection but not TB disease, your doctor may want you to take a drug to prevent you from developing the disease. The decision about taking preventive therapy will be based on your age and on the chances that you will develop the disease. Some people are more likely than others to develop TB disease once they have TB infection: people with HIV infection, people who were recently exposed to someone with TB disease, and people with certain medical conditions.

The drug used to prevent TB is isoniazid. It is taken for 6 to 12 months. Isoniazid may cause liver problems in certain people, especially older people and people with liver disease. Therefore, people who are taking isoniazid should be monitored carefully for signs of adverse reactions.

Treatment for TB Disease

TB disease can be cured by taking several drugs for 6 to 9 months. It is very important that people who have TB disease take the drugs exactly as prescribed. If they stop taking the drugs too soon or if they do not take the drugs correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to those drugs. TB that is resistant to drugs is harder to treat.

In some situations, staff of the local health department meet regularly with patients who have TB to help them remember to take their medications. This is called directly observed therapy.

Trends in TB

About 8 million new cases of TB occur each year in the world. The number of TB cases reported in the United States has increased every year since 1985. In 1994, 24,361 cases of TB disease were reported in the United States; the provisional number for 1995 is 22,813 cases, a decline of over 6 percent. Also, about 10 to 15 million people in the United States are infected with the TB germ; these people may develop TB disease in the future.



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FAX this sheet with your comments to: CDC-VIS/FAX (404) 639-1733, or

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1. You are

- ☐ health care professional
☐ other

2. Fax sheet(s) you received:

- ☐ Tuberculosis (TB): General Information
☐ TB Infection vs. TB Disease
☐ Diagnosis of TB Infection (Tuberculin Skin Test) and TB Disease
☐ Treatment of TB Infection (Preventive Therapy)
☐ Treatment of TB Disease
☐ Management of Persons Exposed to Multidrug-Resistant TB
☐ BCG Vaccine
☐ Infection Control
☐ Screening for TB
☐ TB Morbidity in the United States
☐ Tuberculosis Educational Materials Order Form

3. Reason you requested fax sheet:

- ☐ for general information on topic
☐ to answer specific question

If you had a specific question, please describe it:

4. The information met your needs.

- ☐ yes
☐ no
☐ partially

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